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SUBJECT: SERB PM KOSTUNICA VISITS EU; SOLANA AND PATTEN'S
"DISAPPOINTING" TRIP TO KOSOVO

REF: BELGRADE 646

Classified By: Rick Holtzapple, PolOff, Reasons 1.4 (B/D)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Our readout of Serb PM Kostunica's March 23 meetings in Brussels with High Rep Solana, and Commissioners Prodi and Patten tracks closely with reftel account from Belgrade. In addition, Kostunica is reported to have hinted at the possibility of a "quiet dialogue" with ICTY, claimed to be open to cooperation with Defense Minister Tadic, and was upbeat on the future of the State Union with Montenegro. Separately, Solana and Patten are reported to have been "very disappointed" by their March 24 visit to Kosovo, with disparaging assessments of both UNMIK SRSG Holkeri and most of the Kosovar Albanian leadership, save PM Rexhepi. END SUMMARY.

KOSTUNICA VISIT

12. (C) KOSOVO: Solana did prompt Kostunica to change his terminology about Kosovo from "cantonization" to "decentralization". (NOTE: At the March 23 Contact Group meeting, which was held just after Solana's meetings with Kostunica, there was general agreement that a further shift in language away from "decentralization" to discussion of "increasing powers of local government" would be desirable. END NOTE.)

13. (C) ICTY: Both Solana and Commissioner Patten were clear that it was up to Belgrade to improve its relations with the court. According to our contacts, Kostunica's reply stressed not only the need to support domestic trials and repetitions of demands for an undefined "two-way street", but he also acknowledge the need to engage with ICTY and claimed Belgrade was "already thinking about a 'quiet dialogue'."

14. (C) SERBIAN POLITICS: Kostunica told both Patten and Solana that he remains open to working with Defense Minister Tadic and that they have a good working relationship. But Kostunica was uncertain what sort of deal could be reached and implied that any difficulties lay with Tadic and his party, not on Kostunica's side. With Patten, Kostunica was also reported to be quite clear that he was not interested in running for President, a development that worries the Commission, as they feel this will leave the field open for the Radicals. Finally, Kostunica was upbeat on prospects for the State Union, as he claimed Milo Djukanovic's political position in Montenegro was weakening, forcing him to cooperate more with Belgrade. Neither Patten nor Solana were persuaded by Kostunica's analysis.

15. (C) Kostunica's team did not earn very favorable reviews from either Solana or Patten's staffs. Trade Minister Bubalo received curiously mixed reviews: Solana's staff found him a rather "concrete" guy with some new ideas. But in the Patten meeting, where trade issues (related to the EU's concerns on customs fraud) were actually discussed, Bubalo was "unimpressive and basically had nothing to say."

SOLANA/PATTEN VISIT TO KOSOVO

16. (C) Patten's staff told us both Patten and Solana returned from their one-day visit to Kosovo on March 24 "very disappointed". Other than sessions with the German commander of KFOR and USOP COM Marcie Ries, the EU officials found their meetings in Pristina rather discouraging. UNMIK SRSG Holkeri was described to us as a "disaster" who gave a "lamentable performance" in his meeting with Solana and Patten. Particularly galling to Solana and Patten was when they were confronted by angry Serb civilians in the town of Kosovo Polje, Holkeri "just sat in his car" and then criticized Solana and Patten for taking risks by talking to the crowd. Solana and Patten were also highly critical of most of the Kosovar Albanian leaders they met, whose statements about the recent violence were entirely inadequate. Ibrahim Rugova reportedly prompted particular disdain ("Solana even refused to accept his rocks") for his weak excuses that he could do little to stop the violence because he did not control the police.

17. (C) By contrast, Solana and Patten were favorably impressed by their meeting with PM Rexhepi. He was "miles ahead of the others" in terms of understanding and accepting his political responsibilities in the current situation. In this context, they took seriously Rexhepi's plea for caution when pressing for punishment of the villains in last week's events, even if they were not completely convinced by his arguments.

SCHNABEL